

PERSONAL NARRATIVES
OF EVENTS IN THE
WAR OF THE REBELLION,

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A PRIVATE'S

RECOLLECTIONS of FREDERICKSBURG

BY

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[Late Company E, Fourth New York Volunteers, and Company I, One
Hundred Fifty-ninth New York Volunteers.]

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A PRIVATE'S RECOLLECTIONS OF FREDERICKSBURG.



(Read before the Society, May 15, 1883.)

December, 1862, found the writer in camp, near the Warrenton Pike, some two miles above the town of Falmouth on the Rappahannock river. He had enlisted in Company E, Fourth Regiment, New York Volunteer Infantry, upon the 22d of April, 1861, to serve two years unless sooner discharged. The Fourth New York Volunteers and the Thirty-eighth New York Volunteers were organized under President Lincoln's first call for 75,000 volunteers, by a veteran organization of the Mexican war, named the Scott Life Guards, of which association General Scott was president. The Fourth New York was known as the First, and the Thirty-eighth New York as the Second, "Scott Life Guards." All of our commissioned officers were veterans of the Mexican

war, as were most of our non-commissioned officers and many privates, owing to which advantage the regiment was, very early in the war, as well disciplined and drilled as many regiments after years of service. The writer was but sixteen years of age at time of enlistment, and at date of commencement of this narrative was an old soldier in service, although but a youth in years.

The Fourth New York was, during the entire winter of 1862-3, the extreme right regiment of the Army of the Potomac and together with the Tenth New York Volunteers, First Delaware Volunteers, and (a portion of the winter) the One hundred and thirty-second Pennsylvania Volunteers, composed the Third Brigade, Third Division, Second Corps, Sumner's Grand Division. Our brigade commander, General Max Weber, had been seriously wounded at Antietam, and never returned to his command, so that the brigade was for a portion of the winter under command of Colonel Bendix, of the Tenth New York, and part of the time of our Colonel, John B. McGregor, who had served gallantly through the war with Mexico, as an officer in the First New York

Volunteers. He was a gentleman, and a fine officer, always cool and self-possessed in action, and while no martinet, was strict and firm in maintaining discipline in his command. General French, our division commander, like General Couch who commanded the corps, is too well known to need any mention by me ; and General Edwin V. Sumner, who commanded the Grand Division, had made a name famous in the history of the Army of the Potomac, while in command of the second corps. The first division of our corps was commanded by that distinguished soldier, General Hancock, who had succeeded General Richardson, killed at Antietam ; and the second division by General Sedgwick, afterwards the famous commander of the sixth corps. All of us who served in the second corps feel a pride in the command which included among its generals such names as Sumner, Couch, Richardson, Hancock, Sedgwick, Weber and Meagher, and this *esprit du corps* will not grow less as time passes on, and the names become merely a memory

We had left Bolivar Heights, Harper's Ferry,

(where we had encamped since the battle of Antietam), on the 30th of October, marched slowly down the Loudon valley, while the rebel army of General Lee was marching down the valley of the Shenandoah upon the other side of the mountain range. At Snicker's Gap, where we arrived on the 2d of November, just in time to prevent General Lee from taking possession, we had a magnificent view of the valley on the other side of the mountains, and saw the whole rebel army of Northern Virginia pass, as though in review. November 3d, arrived at Upperville, where we bivouacked until the 6th, and upon the 9th reached Warrenton. At this place, on the 10th of November, General Burnside relieved General McClellan of the command of the Army of the Potomac, and a grand review by both generals took place. We left Warrenton upon the 15th, and arrived at the Rappahannock river on the 17th, too late to occupy Fredericksburg without resistance.

Soon after our arrival, having pitched camp, and made and drank coffee in camp style, which was—each man boil for himself in a quart tin cup, and

cool by pouring into, and drinking from a pint cup of the same metal ; several of us, without thinking it necessary to obtain leave, paid a visit to the little town of Falmouth for the purpose of finding a sutler's shop, and laying in some tobacco and other articles. Being entirely ignorant of the fact that passes were required in order to safely leave camp, several of us stood upon the street, and allowed ourselves to be captured by a Provost marshal's guard, who marched us, together with a number of other soldiers from various regiments, some two miles upon the wrong side of Falmouth, delivering us over to the tender mercy of General Patrick, Provost Marshal General of the Army of the Potomac, at his headquarters. Here after waiting until nearly dark, we had patiently to listen to a lecture from the general, and after being admonished to do so no more, and pleading ignorance of the fact that passes were required, and stating that our own officers allowed us to leave camp, were instructed to "give wide publicity" to the statement of the general that no one was allowed under any circumstances to leave the encampment of his command without the neces-

sary document. We were then released to find our way home, some four miles, in the dark, through a strange country, hilly and broken with ravines. But worse than the tramp was our chagrin as old soldiers at having been green enough to allow ourselves to be captured by a Provost guard, which certainly would not have occurred, had we been aware that they were making such arrests. The interview with General Patrick made an impression upon my mind which is indelible. I can still in my mind's eye see the kind-hearted, gray-haired old man, wave his hands and repeat, "give it wide publicity, boys, wide publicity."

Our first picket duty on this line, was upon the river bank, about one-half mile in front of our camp, and about two miles above Falmouth. The river at this point was full of rocks and fordable, with banks low, immediately at the edge of the river, but rising into quite a high hill a short way back. The pickets were stationed upon the hills overlooking the river, and in spite of orders to the contrary, we used to frequently pass our pickets, descend to the water's edge and signal to the rebels opposite, who, if I

recollect rightly, belonged to the Fourth Georgia and Eighth Alabama regiments. Upon seeing our signals, they would at once prepare for business by loading themselves with cloth haversacks of tobacco, and holding them above their heads, plunge into the icy cold water, and make their way across to our side, sometimes passing from rock to rock, and sometimes up to their breasts in water. Two generally came over at a time, and as soon as they arrived barter would commence, and in a few minutes the tobacco would be exchanged for overcoats, shoes, blankets, coffee and sugar, or any of the numerous articles plentiful with us, but scarce with them, when they would at once return, both parties being satisfied with their bargains. Tobacco, in our camp, was at that time worth (sutler's price) \$2.50 per pound, and they would give for an overcoat, which was charged to us at \$7.50, ten pounds of navy plug tobacco, or \$25 in value. They informed us they could draw such portion of their pay as they wished, in tobacco at \$1.00 per pound, and the articles received by them in trade were of great value on their side of the river. The writer once, in bitter cold

weather, traded off his overcoat, not knowing at that time when another could be procured, as quartermaster's stores were, for want of transportation, scarce; but tobacco and money with which to purchase from a sutler were still scarcer. On arriving in camp I had the good fortune to find among a number of comrades who had been absent from the regiment since the battle of Antietam, and just arrived from hospitals, one who had two overcoats and no tobacco; another trade was soon made, and three pounds of rebel tobacco exchanged for a better overcoat than I had sold for ten pounds. This was a piece of good fortune which did not always happen, for many a man famished for tobacco, traded away a blanket, or overcoat, which he could not replace for weeks. I once asked one of these rebel traders if they wore the overcoats which they were always anxious to purchase. He replied, "No, indeed, they were too fine for them to wear;" that they sold readily in Richmond to civilians for \$100 each. Papers were also exchanged, we being always pleased to get Richmond papers, and they equally anxious to buy New York papers, Harper's Weekly having a partic-

ular value in their eyes. This traffic was in violation of orders on our side, but was allowed on the other ; I presume from the fact that while they traded away nothing but tobacco, they purchased articles of food and clothing which it was an object to them to acquire by any means. In spite of orders to the contrary, it was kept up all winter at different points on the river. There was also a boat which was sent backwards and forwards across the river, coming north laden with one plug of tobacco and two or three papers, which was about its capacity ; these articles would be removed, and replaced by New York papers, sugar and coffee, its sails and rudder set, and pushed off into the river on its return trip. We were ordered to retain it and report to the officer of the guard, but I think this order was never obeyed, for I heard of the boat as still plying between the two picket lines until spring.

From this picket duty on the river, we were removed to a line from the river, crossing the Warrenton road, upon the extreme right wing of the army, and but about one-quarter of a mile from our regimental camp. The favorite post was in the entrance

of a tomb in a family burying-ground. The front of this tomb had been torn down previous to our arrival and the contents piled back, leaving room for three men to sit or lie down in the front portion, well sheltered from the weather, and with a good view across the fields in front. From here, in a short time we were removed to the Lacy House, opposite Fredericksburg, some four miles from our camp. The details for this duty were made for three days at a time, and came about three times a month, so that during the remainder of the winter we had to spend three consecutive days out of every ten in this delightful spot. There were but three posts to stand at this point, and they along the bank of the river, so that during the three days' tour of duty, no one stood guard for more than one relief, and some not at all. This was, unlike most picket duty, not desirable, as our reserve was stationed in a ravine near the Lacy house, without warm food, or even fire to make coffee—so indispensable to a soldier, entirely without shelter, and for the greater portion of the time with clothing wet through, and frozen stiff, unable during the whole time to lie down or

sleep. The weather for the entire winter was terribly severe, raining and freezing most of the time. The rebel guards opposite were stationed in houses along the river bank, and as by mutual agreement there was no picket firing, they simply sat in the windows without arms, and looked out upon the river. Once during the winter, some picket firing occurred above us, which was followed by our posts being drawn back from their exposed position by the river, and a flag of truce boat crossing. What caused the firing we never learned, but it was soon stopped, and our posts re-established. When the firing commenced and before our posts were changed, the "rebs" opposite called across, "Say, Yanks, there are some fools shooting across the river up above, but we won't shoot if you don't." They were assured that we would not, unless fired upon first. Picket firing as a general thing is not only unpleasant, but foolish, as it increases the hardships on both sides, causes wounds and loss of life, and effects nothing for either side. Early in the war when hostiles were stationed within sight of each other, picket firing was almost sure

to result ; but later, as the soldiers on either side became more experienced, unless some movement was actually under way, they generally came to a mutual understanding not to fire, and this agreement was generally fulfilled, until the truce was broken by some green or timid soldier, and then both sides were always glad to have it stopped. Owing to lack of warm food and the hardships undergone through want of sleep and severe weather, the termination of our three days' duty generally found us in such a condition, that when relieved in the morning, there would be no attempt to march back to camp in order, but ranks were broken and, every man for himself, all straggled, as best they could, towards home, where we had comfortable log houses with canvas roofs, good bunks, and large mud fire-places ; some frequently not reaching camp until night, and completely worn out. Though but about four miles off, the route lay over a broken, hilly country, through half frozen Virginia mud (than which none is worse), up and down deep ravines, and across creeks, which in our exhausted condition made it seem of interminable length.

When camp was at last reached, we would throw ourselves into our bunks and sleep for hours, even hunger being for the time a secondary consideration. Why we had to do picket duty so far from our camp, while other regiments came as far to perform the same duty within one-quarter of a mile from our tents, I presume General Couch could tell, but I certainly never was able to find any one else who could. During part of November and the first portion of December, details were daily made of fatigue parties from each regiment of our brigade (except the Tenth New York, who having a handsome Zouave uniform, were detailed as guard at General Couch's head-quarters,) to report at head-quarters for the purpose of throwing up sand works opposite Fredericksburg. This was the only duty of a soldier ever shirked by the writer, and this duty he had vowed he would never perform. Arriving at the place where work was going on and answering to a roll-call, he would generally secure a pick, and after gently sticking it into the soil once or twice, would make himself scarce, and hunt camp. As many members of the regiment wounded in action had not

yet returned to duty, many on the sick list daily excused from duty, and some excused for being without shoes, men to fill the details were scarce, and these details coming sometimes three or four times a day, put the orderly sergeants to much trouble to fill them; so that they would generally order out the first men they could find in camp, and take no excuse. The writer distinctly remembers that in one day he was three times detailed for this work, and when he plead that he had already been detailed once or twice that day, the sergeant replied it made no difference, and threatened if he would not go to report him for running away. Thus he answered for three men, and did not build a sand battery after all. But fortunately for the artillery men, who were to occupy the works thrown up for them by the infantry, there were soldiers more familiar with the pick and shovel, and by the tenth of December, sand works with their embrasures nicely lined with green cow hides were completed, and the different batteries in position. At daylight, on the morning of December 11th, these batteries opened upon the rebel works in the rear of Freder-

icksburg. Striking camp, we marched to a point opposite the city and near where the Fifteenth regiment, New York Engineers, were trying to lay a pontoon bridge. This movement was opposed by sharpshooters, and a skirmish line stationed in the houses, and rifle pits along the river bank. In the afternoon after our artillery had thoroughly shelled these houses, a force of volunteers was sent across in pontoon boats, and after some loss succeeded in driving the skirmishers from the river front, and the engineers, assisted by details from several infantry regiments, completed the laying of the bridge. At daybreak on the morning of December 12th, the second corps crossed the bridge into the city, our batteries shelling over our heads and the enemy not replying a shot. We found the city entirely deserted by both the inhabitants and soldiers, and in fact, we, the rank and file of the army, supposed that Lee was in retreat, and had abandoned the line of the Rappahannock. Our mistake we were to discover later. Stacking arms in the street, the men dispersed about the town, and while the town was virtually, for a part of the day at least, given up to

be sacked, tobacco seemed to be the only article the men cared to take. Dwelling houses were occupied by the troops, flour confiscated for slap-jacks, and pianos and furniture used ; but, at least as far as my observation went, I can say, that while some damage was necessarily done to these houses and contents, I saw no willful destruction of any property. On a corner near where my regiment spent the day and night, was a bank with the vault closed and locked, and no attempt at all was made to open it, although some of the boys wondered as to its contents. Soon after arriving in the city, the writer found temporary quarters in a fine mansion near the outskirts of the city. A solid shot had passed entirely through this house, in its course passing not over two feet above a bed ; and that bed and room showed evident signs of a hasty getting up and out. Settling down in an easy chair in a fine library, with a copy of Byron to read, war and rumors of war were soon forgotten, when suddenly a rifle shot was heard, quickly succeeded by another nearer by ; looking from the window, on the corner within a few yards of the front of the house, was seen a soldier in grey loading his

piece; further reading was hastily postponed, the back yard gained, fences jumped, until the centre of the block was reached; then the street successfully crossed, through the yard opposite into the next street, where soldiers in blue were found. This was the first intimation received that I did not as yet own a house and library in Fredericksburg, and that Lee was not as far on his way to Richmond as we had hoped. Later in the day the rebels fired from their batteries on the hills, which had been so long silent, at our troops which were still crossing the river; and we then began to suspect there was other business before us, than simply following in the track of a retreating army. As our wagons had not crossed the river with rations, I was one of a detail made to cross to the opposite side, draw rations for our company, and return with them. Our only difficulty in going was to press our way through the troops moving in the opposite direction from which we were going; but on our return, the rebel batteries had got pretty good range of the bridge, and shell falling near made it quite exciting, a number of the men crossing being hit; but our

detail escaping with the loss only of several boxes of hard tack, for which the contents of the flour barrels in the houses occupied by us had to suffer, and the men did not complain, as slap-jacks, for a change, were considered superior to hard-tack. In the parlor of the house occupied by Company E was a piano, and as several of the boys could "play *at*" that instrument, we had quite an impromptu concert and stag dance.

On the morning of the 13th, we were awakened from the unusual luxury of sleep upon a carpeted floor, by our batteries across the river opening fire upon the enemy's works. Artillery dashed up the streets, which ran through the city from the river to the open country beyond, and attempted to get into position. Then the rebels opened in earnest and the streets, from the hills in the rear to the river in front, were swept and raked by the fire of artillery, which in a few minutes made it impossible for our guns to maintain positions. Although the houses were not shelled, they were frequently hit, and fragments of brick, as well as of shell, were hurled through the air, wounding and killing horses

and men, and together with the noise making a perfect pandemonium. Perhaps the most trying position in which a soldier can be placed is standing still under an artillery fire which he cannot return, and must calmly see the effects of, without the exhilaration and excitement of action. This we had to undergo through all the long morning, until about noon, when the order to advance was given, and although this advance meant to face the whole fury of a hotter fire, it was at least action, and was felt as a relief. As we crossed the streets running through the town, which were swept by the artillery fire of the enemy, a laugh was created in our company by George Monroe, one of our tallest men, and as brave a one as ever stepped to the music of war, hesitating, making a pause to pull up the collar of his overcoat, and with head down, running across as though through a shower of rain, instead of a hurricane of iron; and until laughed at, perfectly unconscious of the absurdity of his action. Passing by the flank through the railroad station commanded, as we afterwards read, by sixty pieces of artillery, we filed out into a field where, under the

most terrific artillery fire we had ever faced, we formed line of battle. During this passage of the railroad station, where, even to veteran soldiers, it appeared as though nothing could live, there was but one shell that fairly struck into our regiment; this shell passed through a man in Company D, cutting him completely in two, exploded in the midst of that company, killing and wounding eleven men. Our line was now formed at the foot of Marye's hill, which was crowned by earth-works, rifle-pits, and a stone wall, defended by both infantry and artillery, and completely commanded in the rear by an elevated plateau, red with the flashes of guns. Now the order came to advance, and up the hill moved French's division to one of the most desperate charges of the whole four years of war. Ranks torn by shot and shell; men falling from terrible grape and canister wounds; the very air lurid, and alive with the flashes of guns, and rent with the long shriek of solid shot and shell, and the wicked whistle of grape; with compressed lips and shortened breath, closing up shoulder to shoulder, at length we gained the brow; then while within a few yards of the rifle-

pits and stone wall, up rose rank after rank of infantry, adding to the avalanche of artillery fire a perfect rain of the less noisy, but more destructive rifle ball. Here, almost blown off our feet, staggering as though against a mighty wind, the line for a few minutes held its ground; then, (but not until orders to that effect had been given, more by the motions of the officers than by their voices), slowly and sullenly it gave way, and retiring a few paces below the brow of the hill, there lay down, panting for breath, and clinging to the ground so desperately attained. The division, (as later reports showed), had lost nearly one-half its numbers inside of fifteen or twenty minutes.

After a slight lull in the roar of battle, the ball again opened, and looking back, we saw the advance of Hancock's division, over the same ground that we had passed. The same tragedy re-occurred, and this splendid division, or what was left of it, lay immediately in our rear. Again was the charge repeated by another division, which we afterwards learned was Humphrey's, of the Fifth corps, but the result was the same. French's division had done all that

men could do, an army could not have successfully assaulted the position, defended as it was; and the hurling of division after division against these impregnable heights was a sacrifice. After dark we were quietly withdrawn, one line at a time, our regiment carrying all of their wounded off with them, leaving none but the dead. I would here state that during two years of service, the Fourth New York lost not a single man by capture and not one by death from disease. Returning to a street facing the river, we stacked arms, and there remained until the night of the 15th of December, when we cautiously withdrew, recrossed the river, and before morning were back in our old camp. Why Lee did not shell the city, into which so many of our troops were crowded, after the fight of the 13th, I have never seen explained; and what the result would have been had he done so, can only be conjectured. Writers upon the battles of the war have agreed, I believe, that no troops could have been successful in an assault upon Marye's hill, and that all that any could have done, was done. As a charge, it was undoubtedly equalled only, if equalled at all during

the war of the rebellion, by that of the rebels at Gettysburg; and there they had the advantage of forming their lines of battle under cover, and were inspired by the thought that the forces that they were about to charge were the raw militia of Pennsylvania, while at Fredericksburg, our troops had to pass through the railroad station by the flank, entirely uncovered, and under a terrible fire, and form line of battle, in open field, in plain view of the enemy, and within point-blank range of his numerous guns; a movement of itself which can only be performed by disciplined and veteran troops.

In conversing with rebels across the river before the movement began, they told us that if we came over, we would find a Long-street, a large Field, two Hills, and a Stone-wall. This punning upon the names of some of their generals, pithily describes the character of the battle-ground. It was generally remarked during the war, that a battle was followed by rain. Shortly after the battle of Fredericksburg came the rain, and the smoke which had been carried off by a north-west wind, was returned by a south-east one, and in the heavy atmosphere, hung over

our camps for several days. Another phenomenon was also noticed : for several days subsequent to the battle, our camps were full of birds, flying hither and thither, as in fright, and either stunned by the noise, or bewildered by the sulphurous fumes of powder, with which the air was filled, they allowed themselves to be easily captured. Of course the foregoing gives but a faint idea of a great battle ; for a private soldier or line officer sees nothing for what occurs in his immediate vicinity, and can, of his own knowledge, tell but little of the most important movements and actions in which he took part. The writer has looked up no authority, examined no account of the battle, with a view to assist in his narrative, but has attempted only to give from recollection and a very meagre diary, an account of what came within his own limited sphere of observation.

